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Enhanced wordplay: further comment on Suits' definition.

In 1977 Bernard Suits presented a codicil to his earlier work on the definition of games¹. In it, he attempted to shed light on the definition of play; a concept he had previously side-stepped despite being able to construct a most elegant definition of game-playing. In this 1977 paper, Suits argues that previous definitions of the term (most notably Huizinga's) that categorise it simply as *any autotelic activity* are insufficient. Suits criticises these conceptions on the grounds that we are either being dishonest or ignorant if we wish to define activities such as religious experience or war as play; "the word "play" seems too small and fragile a vessel to contain such a volume of meaning without spilling over or bursting apart"². As an alternative, Suits turns to developing Schopenhauer's conception of animal play that focuses on an expression and exuberance of energy. The result leads Suits to categorise play as "a temporary reallocation to autotelic activities of resources primarily committed to instrumental purposes"³. However, this definition has recently been criticised by Bill Morgan⁴ on two accounts; 1 - for overcomplicating matters through his determination to retain the prerequisite 'resource', and 2 - for leading to some disagreeable conclusions; particularly, that Suits's definition renders *play* and *game-playing* not only logically unrelated (as Suits claims) but as being logically incompatible. Whilst Morgan correctly highlights that Suits's definition, as it is, leaves open space for contradictions and inconsistencies, I also believe that Suits leaves his analysis of the notion of 'seriousness' under-developed. It is through returning to this notion that could overcome some of these criticisms. As such, this paper will return to Suits's consideration of the concept of play and attempt to provide a solution to these problems.

What I am going to do in this paper is to start off with some background description about Suits' definition of play and Morgan's criticism that it renders play and game-playing not logically independent as Suits suggests but logically incompatible. Finally, I'll show how Bäck's criticism of Suits's definition is unreasonable and speculate that Suits had a much more playful motive behind much of his work over and above formulating analytical definitions of concepts such as play and game.

I will state at the outset that for those of you who have not read Bernard Suits' work, you would be better off doing so than listening to me speak about it. He is arguably one of the most original, contemporary, philosophical writers that I have come across and he writes in such beautiful narrative with wonderfully amusing examples. His book *The Grasshopper* is a superb example of analytical philosophy that is philosophically rigorous and engaging and witty at the same time.

I'm going to start with Suits' definition of game-playing since that is where he started prior to he then later attempted to define play. For those of you that are unfamiliar with Suits' motivation

¹ Suits, B. (1977) "Words on Play." *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, IV, 117–131.

² *Ibid.* p117

³ *Ibid.* p124

⁴ Morgan, W.J. (2008) "Some Further Words on Suits on Play" *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, 35, 120-141.

behind such a definition, it was an attack on Wittgenstein's claim that games cannot be defined. In fact, throughout his work, Suits seems to revel in taking an explicitly anti-Wittgensteinian stance. I will return to this intention to dismiss Wittgenstein at the end of my paper. So Suits, playing the convincing role of an analytical philosopher, believed that we ought to try harder in forming a definition. Suits ultimately provides two definitions, a short one that states, "game playing is the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles" and a longer one which includes his four criteria of goal, means, rules, and lusory attitude. This he states as,

"To play a game is to attempt to achieve a specific state of affairs [prelusory goal], using only means permitted by rules [lusory means], where the rules prohibit use of more efficient in favour of less efficient means [constitutive rules], and where the rules are accepted just because they make possible such activity [lusory attitude]." (p41)

Although his definition has been subject to criticism, considering how shaky most definitions are, it has proved to be pretty robust.

So what is the link then between games and play? When Suits originally focused upon a definition of game-playing, he gave only a cursory nod to the concept of play. And in a way that is unsurprising since, as I mentioned, his focus on games was in response to Wittgenstein's claim, and game-playing seems to be a slightly less ephemeral concept than play itself. However, when Suits was to consider play in more detail he made an immediate distinction between two types of play; primitive play (such as a baby splashing with water in a bathtub) and sophisticated play (such as a game of chess), and it is the latter that has most relevance to games and to his bold assertion that a utopian existence must necessarily consist in a life of sophisticated play, or game-playing.

Suits begins his consideration of play by roundly criticising Huizinga's conclusion that "all is play" (p239). By calling all autotelic activity – that is, activity done for its own sake - play, one manages to side-step a definition. For such a definition would include a cat chasing its tail and also Aristotle contemplating the existence of God. Both are autotelic activities yet it would be absurd to say that both are instances of play. So we cannot say that autotelic activity and play are synonymous. It may be, Suits acknowledges, that all instances of play are autotelic but not that all autotelic activities are play. An additional criterion is required and that, Suits proposes, is concerned with 'seriousness'. Yet it isn't so straightforward to say that one must be involved in a non-serious autotelic activity to be playing, for as Suits acknowledges, many instances of play, and of game-playing in particular, are taken very seriously. However, this is where as Bill Morgan rightly highlights, Suits definition of play becomes very odd. On the one hand, Suits wants to say that playing necessarily involves something non-serious – in contrast to the seriousness of religious contemplation, aka. Aristotle mulling over the nature of God – and yet on the other, he recognises that for many, game-playing is as serious. On this, Suits says,

"In contending that playing and playing games are logically independent, I mean that, even though game-playing very often *is* playing, one cannot conclude that *because* x is an instance of playing that x is therefore an instance of game playing, and also that one cannot conclude that *because* y is an instance of game playing that it is therefore an instance of playing."

Suits reaches his conclusion by arguing that games and play are two different types of categories; play is a relative term that can only be understood in a context against things that are not play,

whilst game is a nonrelative term. The analogy he uses is between 'light' as opposed to 'dark' and the colour 'blue'. It makes no sense to ask, 'what is the opposite to blue?' just as the term 'light' makes no sense unless it is relative to something. So play can only be understood in relation to things that aren't play; we often use the relation to work for instance, whereas games can be understood in isolation. Suits goes on to say that when we denote that someone is playing, we are tacitly saying that they not treating whatever they playing with (and this can be an object or the environment or even time itself) in the way that it ought to be treated, i.e. with the required level of seriousness. We are making some kind of relative statement.

Suits then turns to Shopenhauer's observation that the play of animals is the discharge of superfluous energy. Yet to say the same of human play is to ignore the fact that humans often discharge superfluous energy in activities that are not play, for instance, in falsely believing that one is not financially secure and so continuing to work, and similarly, in discharging energy that is not superfluous in playful activities. As Suits notes, it was the usurpation of scarce energy that killed the legendary grasshopper who spent his days, contrary to the hard working ant, by playing. From this consideration, emerges Suits definition of play:

"..a temporary reallocation to autotelic activities of resources primarily committed to instrumental purposes." (p124)

Suits concludes therefore, that simply being an autotelic activity is not sufficient for us to label it as play, it also needs to involve some kind of reallocation of resource away from being used in the way it is instrumentally intended. As a relative term, we can only view something as play if we can see how a resource can be used in a way that isn't play.

However, Bill Morgan identifies a problem with Suits definition. This, he labels as the divided-resource problem.

In his definition, Suits recognises that we can be playing, without playing with anything (resource) in particular. So he overcomes this problem by including time as a resource. Yet, if time is included as a resource to be reallocated, how do we know whether to define an instance of play utilising this resource (which is arguably included in every instance of play) or another resource. Which, Morgan asks, is the reallocated one?

Furthermore, in support of Suits' earlier claim that game-playing and playing are logically independent, Suits also states that games which have specially designed equipment for playing that game, are not necessarily instances of play, since there is no reallocation of resource. A baseball bat is instrumentally designed to hit baseballs, and therefore, under Suits' definition, is not an instance of playing. Whereas attempting to shove a baseball bat up your nose is as it does not have that use as its primary instrumental purpose. So, in the former example, one would not be playing baseball, in the latter, one would be. That is a very queer conclusion indeed.

Morgan goes on to note that what Suits says in 'Words on Play' and what he actually argues are two different things. He says that games and play are logically independent but he actually argues that they are logically incompatible. This seems totally counter-intuitive and therefore renders Suits definition of play as flawed.

To overcome this problem, Morgan focuses upon the distinction between objectively instrumentally valuable activities and objectively intrinsically valuable activities. They are objectively valued by either being agent-neutral or agent-relative. That is, they are not valuable simply because of someone's subjective preference regardless of any of the features or characteristics of the thing in itself. For something to be agent-neutral, the value must be contained within the object and not from a valuer's perspective. For something to be agent-relative, its value is conferred intersubjectively and thereby inherent within social practices. This is Morgan's preferred conceptualisation of an objectively valuable activity and, he argues, a way of patching up Suits' flawed definition of play.

In order to do this, Morgan returns to two of Suits' criteria for game-playing; that of means and ends. The means, by definition are instrumental since they lead to ends (winning, achieving a specific state of affairs, e.g. putting a golf ball in a cup). The particular aspect of games is that the ends cannot be separated from the means. The end of getting a ball in a cup only makes sense as the game of golf when it is done using particular means; starting at a designated point several hundred yards away, using long headed sticks to move the ball, avoiding man-made obstacles of sand and water. In contrast, the ends in instrumentally valued activities can be separated from the means. I value my car because it enables me to get to work, but if someone invented a teleport machine that meant that I could get out of bed half an hour later, I would use that instead. Furthermore, the ends of games are trivial and arbitrarily chosen. There is no intrinsic value in getting a ball in a cup; rather it is the instrumental means that provides it with value.

It is this that Morgan argues is how Suits can remedy the flaw in his definition whereby an instance of game playing is logically incompatible with an instance of play. In a game, resources have already been reallocated so they do not need to be reallocated further in order to be an example of playing. Since the means and the ends are inseparable in game-playing, and a game requires the use of inefficient means, there is no need for further allocation of instrumental resource.

However, there is one further problem with Suits' definition of play and this is where it leads him; that is, in conceptualising utopia as one that consists entirely of sophisticated play or game-playing.

This is noted by Allan Bäck in his essay entitled 'The Paper World of Bernard Suits' which focuses on Suits' conceptualisation of play as a relative term that can only be understood in relation to activities that are not play. In attempting to construct a definition, Suits intended to refute the post-modern claim that the world is only as we wish to describe it. Suits says this himself in his 'Words on Play' when he recounts Humpty-Dumpty applying whatever meanings to words that he wished. Suits in contrast wished to describe the world as it is which would therefore leave space for a definition of play. Yet, Bäck argues that Suits ends up doing exactly the opposite; that is constructing a paper world rather than describing the real one. In fact, much of Bäck's essay is a derisive criticism of Suits' attempt at a definition and of his *Grasshopper*, and furthermore of most of the work done in the *Philosophy of Sport* in looking at these concepts.

Although I think Bäck identifies an inherent flaw in Suits' conception of utopia, I think he is unreasonable and ungenerous in his criticism. Bäck describes Suits' definition of play as 'doing things you value for their own sake' – intrinsically valuable activities - in contrast to work which is 'doing things we value for the sake of something else' – instrumentally valuable activities. However, then Bäck makes the assumption that all instrumentally valuable activities are therefore work, and all

intrinsically valued activities are therefore play. Yet, as we have seen, this is not Suits' definition at all. Nevertheless, Bäck uses this misrepresentation to return us to the Huizinga definition that Suits rejected.

I think it is worth reiterating Huizinga's definition that Bäck points to here:

"[play is] a free activity standing quite consciously outside 'ordinary' life as being 'not serious', but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. It promotes the formation of social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world by disguise or other means." (p32)

What is it that Suits so disliked about Huizinga's definition? Suits agreed with the notion that it must entail some kind of non-seriousness which later became his reallocation of instrumental resource. He recognised it as an autotelic activity similar to Huizinga's non-material interest, and understood that it involved some kind of relation to rules; indeed he made it a necessary criterion for his definition of game-playing. It seems then that Suits' definition is not too dissimilar from Huizinga's after all.

So what is Suits playing at – if you'll excuse the pun?

Well, this is where I will return to Bäck's primary criticism of Suits in his conceptualisation of utopia. Bäck argues that Suits' conception of utopia is nonsensical. He goes further in saying that "the Utopia of the Grasshopper self-destructs into postmodern babble".

This to an extent is true. Suits utopia does ultimately self-destruct. But I am sure that Suits himself realised this and intended it to be so. Suits argues that the term play is a relative one. Yet in utopia there is nothing to be relative to, since all instrumental activities are eliminated. And yet, game-playing (the only activity left in Suits utopia) is a form of play when it is engaged in for purely autotelic reasons (that is when it is not done professionally or to save someone's life). Suits recognised this himself. At the end of his book, the Grasshopper has a final vision of the downfall of Utopia. He notes that eventually, people would come to conclude 'that if their lives were merely games, then those lives [are] scarcely worth living.' It would only be through self-deception that they could do something meaningful (i.e. doing something that wasn't merely playing a game) that they could continue to exist. But what this ultimately intrinsically valuable goal is remains as paradoxical as ever and Suits acknowledged this at the end of both *The Grasshopper* and his 'Words on Play'.

I'm not sure why Bäck seems to be so angry and frustrated at Suits (and you have to read his paper to really appreciate his animosity) when it seems obvious what Suits is doing all along, and that is playing. Not necessarily with us in a malicious way as Bäck implies in his scornful branding of Suits as an evil genius, but in a much more genial way. And perhaps this is where Huizinga's final criteria comes in – in the promotion and formation of social groupings. Those that have read Suits book and have understood it as an attempt to engage Wittgenstein (or at least his supporters) in a game are able to raise a wry and knowing smile to each other. Perhaps we can see that Suits is paying Wittgenstein an honour after all, in showing rather than saying in his definition of play as Wittgenstein himself did with his *Tractatus*. And that I think is the real beauty in Suits' work.